

FROM THE BOOKSHELF #131  
GENE KERN

MARCH 9, 1976

"CURTAIN" BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

ANNCR: AND NOW, THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES...FROM THE BOOKSHELF... IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY... "CURTAIN," A NOVEL BY AGATHA CHRISTIE, PUBLISHED BY DODD, MEAD. HERE IS BOOK EDITOR -----WITH GENE KERN'S REVIEW OF "CURTAIN."

EDITOR: ON AUGUST SIXTH, 1975, THE NEW YORK TIMES CARRIED A FRONT-PAGE OBITUARY WITH THE HEADLINE "HERCULE POIROT IS DEAD; FAMED BELGIAN DETECTIVE." THE ARTICLE SKETCHED THE CAREER OF THE WORLD-RENOWNED, DAPPER, LITTLE MAN WHO FIRST BECAME FAMOUS AFTER RETIRING FROM THE BELGIAN POLICE FORCE IN 1904. THAT CAREER, THE TIMES EXPLAINED, AS CHRONICLED IN THE NOVELS OF THE BRITISH WRITER, DAME AGATHA CHRISTIE, HIS CREATOR, "WAS ONE OF THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS IN FICTION."

THIS WAS CERTAINLY NO EXAGGERATION. FROM HIS DEBUT IN "THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT STYLES," PUBLISHED FIFTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, MONSIEUR POIROT SOLVED UNCOUNTED MYSTERIES IN THE INNUMERABLE SHORT STORIES AND THIRTY-SEVEN FULL LENGTH NOVELS IN WHICH HE APPEARED...TO THE DELIGHT OF MILLIONS OF ADMIRERS IN MANY LANDS.

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"CURTAIN", OF COURSE, IS THE STORY OF HIS FINAL EXPLOIT. ALTHOUGH THREE DECADES HAVE PASSED SINCE IT WAS WRITTEN (DAME AGATHA ORIGINALLY INTENDED IT TO BE PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY), IT HAS BEEN NUMBER ONE ON BEST-SELLER LISTS IN THE UNITED STATES SINCE OCTOBER, WHEN IT WAS FIRST AVAILABLE IN BOOKSTORES.

THE STORY IS TOLD IN THE FIRST PERSON BY CAPTAIN HASTINGS, FOIL AND GOOD FRIEND TO POIROT, WHOSE ROLE IS NOT UNLIKE THAT OF WATSON TO SHERLOCK HOLMES. THOUGH CRIPPLED BY AGE AND ARTHRITIS, POIROT HAS INVITED HASTINGS TO JOIN HIM AT STYLES COURT, SCENE OF HIS FIRST SUCCESS IN ENGLAND. THAT COUNTRY MANSION HAS ALSO SUFFERED THE RAVAGES OF TIME AND IS NOW REDUCED TO A "GUEST HOUSE," PEOPLED BY A TYPICAL AGATHA CHRISTIE CAST OF ENGLISH MIDDLE-CLASS CHARACTERS, INCLUDING HASTINGS' DAUGHTER, JUDITH. ONE OF THEM, POIROT TELLS HASTINGS, IS "X", A QUINTUPLE MURDERER CERTAIN TO STRIKE AGAIN UNLESS THEY CAN STOP HIM. THIS, HE DECLARES, WILL BE HIS "LAST...AND MOST INTERESTING CASE." THOUGH POIROT IS CONFINED TO A WHEEL-CHAIR AND HAS TO BE ATTENDED TO "LIKE A BABY," HIS EGOTISM AND HIS OTHER MOST POTENT WEAPON ARE UNIMPAIRED: "MERCIFULLY, THOUGH THE OUTSIDE DECAYS, THE CORE IS STILL SOUND," HE CONFIDES. "THE BRAIN, MON CHER, IS WHAT I MEAN BY THE CORE. MY BRAIN!, IT STILL FUNCTIONS MAGNIFICENTLY".

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AND SO, OF COURSE, IT DOES. IN A MATTER OF DAYS, TWO MURDERS ARE COMMITTED AND POIROT HIMSELF, DIES OF A HEART ATTACK -- BUT NOT BEFORE HE HAS UNCOVERED THE IDENTITY OF "X", MADE SURE HE MET HIS JUST REWARD, AND WRITTEN A TWENTY-FIVE PAGE MANUSCRIPT FOR HASTINGS NEATLY EXPLAINING EVERY DETAIL. THUS THE SAGA OF WHAT ONE REVIEWER CALLS "THE MOST PREPOSTEROUS DETECTIVE OF THE GOLDEN AGE" COMES TO A TRIUMPHANT AND TIDY CONCLUSION. IT ENDS IN THE SAME HOUSE WHERE IT BEGAN, WITH THE SAME WINNING COMBINATION OF THE CLEVER LITTLE BELGIAN WITH THE BIG MOUSTACHE AND THE FRACTURED ENGLISH AND THE BIG, HEARTY, WHOLESOME, NAIVE ENGLISHMAN.

"CURTAIN" IS NEITHER THE CLEVEREST NOR THE BEST WRITTEN OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S DETECTIVE NOVELS. THE CHARACTERS TEND TO BE TWO-DIMENSIONAL ARCHETYPES, REMOTE FROM THE REALITY OF NOT ONLY TODAY BUT ALSO OF THE 1940'S WHEN THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN. THERE IS ALSO A CLICHE QUALITY TO THE NARRATIVE AND DIALOGUE THAT VERGES AT TIMES ON PARODY.

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CONSIDER, FOR EXAMPLE, THIS EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE SLEUTHS:

"ENFIN, I AM TIRED," POIROT TELLS HASTINGS."  
'YOU CAN FOLLOW PEOPLE ABOUT, TALK TO THEM, SPY UPON THEM UNOBSERVED --' (I NEARLY UTTERED AN INDIGNANT PROTEST, BUT QUELLED IT. IT WAS TOO OLD AN ARGUMENT.)  
'YOU CAN LISTEN TO CONVERSATIONS, YOU HAVE KNEES THAT

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WILL STILL BEND AND PERMIT YOU TO KNEEL AND LOOK  
THROUGH KEYHOLES --'

"'I WILL NOT LOOK THROUGH KEYHOLES,' I INTERRUPTED  
HOTLY.

"POIROT CLOSED HIS EYES.

"'VERY WELL, THEN. YOU WILL NOT LOOK THROUGH  
KEYHOLES. YOU WILL REMAIN THE ENGLISH GENTLEMAN AND  
SOMEONE WILL BE KILLED. IT DOES NOT MATTER, THAT.  
HONOUR COMES FIRST WITH AN ENGLISHMEN. YOUR HONOUR  
IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SOMEBODY ELSE'S LIFE. BIEN,  
IT IS UNDERSTOOD.'

"'NO, BUT DASH IT ALL, POIROT --'"

BUT THAT IS ONLY PART OF THE PICTURE AND,  
FORTUNATELY, THE LESSER PART. AGATHA CHRISTIE  
HAD NOT LOST HER CUNNING WHEN SHE WROTE "CURTAIN."  
THOUGH THE CHARACTERS MAY SEEM OUT-OF-DATE AND THE  
STORY CONTRIVED AND HARD TO SWALLOW ON REFLECTION,  
IT IS A GENUINE TOUR DE FORCE. THE DECEPTION AND  
ESSENTIAL MYSTERY ARE THERE, TO PUZZLE AND INTRIGUE  
THE READER DOWN TO THE VERY LAST PAGE. TRY AS HE  
WILL, THE CHANCES ARE HE WILL NOT EVEN COME NEAR  
GUESSING THE OUTCOME. FEW DETECTIVE-FICTION ADDICTS --  
AND THEY ARE LEGION - WILL NOT STAY WITH IT ALL THE WAY,  
ENJOYING EVERY TWIST AND TURN UNTIL THE FINAL  
REVELATION.

POIROT'S CREATOR, AGATHA CHRISTIE, HERSELF DIED IN  
JANUARY, 1976 AT THE AGE OF EIGHTY-FIVE. IN PRIVATE  
LIFE DAME AGATHA WAS THE WIFE OF THE DISTINGUISHED

EDITOR: BRITISH ARCHEOLOGIST, SIR MAX MALLOWAN. SHE HAD SET  
(CONT) OUT TO BE AN OPERA SINGER, NOT A WRITER. BUT SHE  
TURNED OUT SIXTY DETECTIVE AND SIX ROMANTIC NOVELS,  
NINETEEN VOLUMES OF SHORT MYSTERY STORIES, FOURTEEN  
PLAYS, TWO WORKS OF NON-FICTION AND EVEN A BOOK  
OF VERSE. ONE OF HER PLAYS, "THE MOUSETRAP," HAS  
BEEN RUNNING IN LONDON SINCE 1952, BREAKING ALL RECORDS.  
HER WORK HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO ALMOST EVERY MAJOR  
LANGUAGE AND HAS SOLD HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF  
COPIES.

BEFORE THE FINAL CURTAIN FELL FOR THIS FABULOUS LADY,  
SHE HAD MANAGED, IN THE WORDS OF ONE COLLEAGUE-REVIEWER,  
"TO ENTERTAIN MORE PEOPLE FOR MORE HOURS AT A TIME  
THAN ALMOST ANY OTHER WRITER OF HER GENERATION."

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REVIEW OF "CURTAIN"  
BY AGATHA CHRISTIE. JOIN US NEXT -----  
(AT THIS TIME) FOR A REPORT ON ANOTHER BOOK  
AMERICANS ARE CURRENTLY CHOOSING...FROM THE  
BOOKSHELF.

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